

# Growth Mindset and Fixed Mindset

## What is the Definition of a Growth Mindset?

A **growth mindset** is “the understanding that abilities and understanding can be developed” (Mindset Works, n.d.). Those with a growth mindset believe that they can get smarter, more intelligent, and more talented through putting in time and effort.

## What is a Fixed Mindset?

On the flipside, a fixed mindset is one that assumes abilities and understanding are relatively fixed. Those with a fixed mindset may not believe that intelligence can be enhanced, or that you either “have it or you don’t” when it comes to abilities and talents.

## What is the Main Difference (Growth Mindset vs. Fixed)?

The main difference between the two mindsets is the belief in the permanence of intelligence and ability; one views it as very permanent, with little to no room for change in either direction, while the other views it as more changeable, with opportunities for improvement (or, for that matter, regression).

This **difference in mindset** may lead to marked differences in behaviour as well. If someone believes intelligence and abilities are immutable traits, they are not likely to put in much effort to change their inherent intelligence and abilities. On the other hand, those who believe they can change these traits may be much more willing to put in extra time and effort to achieve more **ambitious goals**. With a growth mindset, individuals may achieve more than others because they are worrying less about seeming smart or talented and putting more of their energy into learning (Dweck, 2016).

While the benefits of cultivating a growth mindset are clearly desirable, the founder of the growth mindset theory is quick to point out that it’s not just about telling yourself (or others) that you can improve; **Carol Dweck** points out three common misconceptions she has encountered:

1. “I already have it, and I always have.” Dweck warns that a growth mindset is not simply being open-minded or optimistic or practicing flexible thinking; it’s more specific than that.
2. “A growth mindset is just about praising and rewarding effort.” Although praising and rewarding effort is generally a good idea, it must be undertaken with an eye on outcomes as well. Effort that is unproductive is not to be rewarded and learning and progress should also be met with praise.
3. Adopting a growth mindset is a positive step that can lead to positive outcomes, but it’s not a guarantee; the mindset needs to be backed up with effort applied to worthwhile activities, and even then success is not inevitable (Dweck, 2016).

## Examples of a Growth Mindset



It's easy to see examples of a growth mindset in students. Those with a growth mindset are apt to see challenges as a natural part of the learning process. They work harder and smarter, helping them to learn and achieve more than students with a fixed mindset.

People with a growth mindset may display behaviours like:

- Asking for feedback
- Speaking up even when unsure
- Asking a question even if it might seem "stupid"
- Seeking out problems that will push them instead of problems that keep them safely within their comfort zone

It may seem like a growth mindset is hard to see in adults, since they're not in a constant learning environment—or are they? That perspective on the environment is a clear-cut example of a growth mindset vs. fixed. Those with a growth mindset are more likely to see every environment as a learning environment and scan for opportunities to improve their skills and enhance their knowledge.

For specific examples, John Rhodes (2015) shares a few scenarios that typify a growth mindset in adults:

### **Example 1: Running late and missing the bus or carpool**

You've certainly been here before: your alarm doesn't go off (or maybe you hit snooze a few too many times) and you oversleep. You jump out of bed and race into your clothes, skipping any part of your morning ritual that isn't completely necessary before racing outside to catch the bus. As you run to the street, you see the bus pulling away and you know you're going to be late.

For someone with a fixed mindset, this scenario might just ruin their whole day. They may feel angry with themselves or look for someone or something else to blame.

On the other hand, someone with a growth mindset is more likely to think about the root cause of the mess they're in and consider how to avoid it next time. They may conclude that they need to go to bed earlier tonight or set their alarm a little bit louder. The point is, the person with a growth mindset will think about ways to fix the problem because they believe it is fixable.

### Example 2: Poor feedback from the boss

Another scenario showcasing a growth mindset: you go in for an evaluation with your boss and you receive negative feedback. Your boss thinks you aren't putting in enough effort, or you're making too many mistakes, or that you're simply not competent enough to handle your current project.

Someone with a fixed mindset may decide that their boss has no idea what she's talking about and completely ignore the feedback. Alternatively, they might agree with their boss and think "I just can't do anything right. I don't have what it takes to be successful."

A growth mindset response would be to seriously consider this feedback, evaluate it as objectively as possible, and seek out more information and/or another opinion to compare. If your boss has a point, you would come up with possible solutions to improve your performance and do your best to implement them.

### Example 3: Praising your child

We'll get to more examples later, but Rhodes offers a good example of a growth mindset in a parent:

*"Kids love praise and parents love giving it. So, when your child comes to you with an A on his math paper, you can either go the fixed mindset route and say, 'You're so smart' or you can go the growth mindset way and acknowledge the effort he or she put in, saying, 'Wow, you really worked hard on that paper!'" (Rhodes, 2015)*

### Example 4: Handling a new project or task

When you are assigned a daunting new task at work or when you take on a challenging project at home, it can be tempting to think "I'm not good at this kind of stuff. It's just not my strong suit!"

You might be right that it's not one of your **strengths**, but that doesn't mean you can't learn it. A fixed mindset will take this self-defeating thought and run with it, concluding that there's no point in putting all that much effort into something that just isn't your cup of tea.

On the other hand, a growth mindset will see this new challenge as an **opportunity to grow**. Someone with this mindset might think, "I can figure this out. What do I need to do to get my skills at the right level? Are there classes I can take? People I can ask for help? Any other resources that might help?"

The growth mindset will lead you to new skills, new knowledge, and new areas of expertise, while the fixed mindset will leave you about where you started—with little skill in the task at hand and little confidence in your abilities.

## How to Change Your Mindset



After reading these examples, you're probably thinking, "Okay, I'm sold on a growth mindset!  
But how do I change my mindset?"

If so, you're right on track! This section is all about what you can do change your mindset. It may not be easy, but you will likely find that all the effort was worth the advantages of a growth mindset.

There are eight general approaches for developing the foundation for such a mindset:

1. Create a new compelling belief: a belief in yourself, in your own skills and abilities, and in your capacity for positive change.
2. View failure in a different light: see failure as an opportunity to learn from your experiences and apply what you have learned next time around.
3. Cultivate your **self-awareness**: work on becoming more aware of your talents, strengths, and weaknesses; gather feedback from those who know you best and put it together for a comprehensive view of yourself.
4. Be curious and commit to lifelong learning: try to adopt the attitude of a child, looking at the world around you with awe and wonderment; ask questions and truly listen to the answers.
5. Get friendly with challenges: know that if you mean to accomplish anything worthwhile, you will face many challenges on your journey; prepare yourself for facing these challenges, and for failing sometimes.
6. Do what you love and love what you do: it's much easier to succeed when you are passionate about what you're doing; whether you cultivate love for what you already do or focus on doing what you already love, **developing passion** is important.
7. Be tenacious: it takes a lot of hard work to succeed, but it takes even more than working hard—you must be tenacious, weathering obstacles and getting back up after each time you fall.
8. Inspire and be inspired by others: it can be tempting to envy others when they succeed, especially if they go farther than you, but it will not help you to succeed; commit to being an inspiration to others and use the success of others to get inspiration as well (Zimmerman, 2016).

## Follow these 8 principles and you will find it hard to have anything but a growth mindset!

For more specific techniques you can use to start building a growth mindset now, try these 25 suggestions from Saga Briggs (2015):

- Acknowledge and embrace your imperfections; don't hide from your weaknesses.
- View challenges as opportunities for self-improvement.
- Try different learning tactics and strategies; don't consider any strategies one-size-fits-all.
- Keep up on the research on brain plasticity to continually encourage the growth mindset.
- Replace the word "failing" with the word "learning" in your vocabulary.
- Stop seeking approval for others and prioritise learning over approval.
- Value the learning process over the end result.
- Cultivate a sense of purpose and keep things in perspective.
- Celebrate your growth with others and celebrate their growth as well.
- Emphasise learning well over learning quickly.
- Reward actions instead of traits.
- Redefine "genius" as hard work plus talent, rather than talent alone.
- Give constructive criticism and accept criticism of your own work as constructive.
- Disassociate improvement from failure; "room for improvement" does not mean "failure."
- Reflect on your learning regularly.
- Reward hard work before talent or inherent ability.
- Emphasise the relationship between learning and "brain training;" like any other muscle, the brain can be trained.
- Cultivate your grit (determination and perseverance).
- Abandon the idea of succeeding on talent alone; recognise that it will always take some work as well.
- Use the phrase "not yet" more often, as in, "I haven't mastered it yet."
- Learn from the mistakes that others make.
- Make a new goal for every goal you accomplish; never stop striving towards your goals.
- Take risks and be vulnerable with others.
- Think realistically about how much time and effort your goal will take.
- Take ownership of your own attitude and take pride in your developing growth mindset.

### Challenge Your Fixed Mindset Voice

This activity involves four steps that are not all that easy, but that can help you to develop the foundation for a lasting growth mindset.

### **Step 1: Learn to hear your fixed mindset voice.**

Pay attention to the voice that pops up when you face a new or particularly daunting challenge. This is the voice of your fixed mindset, and it likely only has negative things to say about you and your abilities. It might say something like “You really think you can do it?” or “This is not one of your strengths, just give up and do something else!”

Once you’ve identified the voice, move on to the next step.

### **Step 2: Recognise that you have a choice.**

After realising that you have a fixed mindset voice and that it’s not necessarily your authentic voice, you will realise that you have a choice in whether to listen to this voice or not. It is up to you to decide how you want to interpret and respond to challenges, setbacks, criticism, and failure.

*Tell yourself that you have a choice and do your best to believe it!*

### **Step 3: Talk back to it with your growth mindset voice.**

When the fixed mindset voice comes nagging at you, start to talk back to it. Question it, throw doubt on its conclusions, and generally counter it wherever you can.

It may say, “Are you sure you can do it? Maybe you don’t have what it takes.”

You can respond, “I’m not sure I can do it now, but I think I can learn to do it with time and effort.”

If it says, “What if you fail—you’ll be a failure!”, respond with “Most successful people had failures along the way.”

When you hit an inevitable setback at some point, it might say, “This would be so much easier if you only had the talent.” If it does, respond with “That’s wrong. Even those with the greatest inherent talent need to work hard to succeed in their field.”

Do whatever you can to challenge that fixed mindset voice and encourage the growth mindset voice.

### **Step 4: Take the growth mindset action.**

Finally, once you have lots of practice challenging the fixed mindset voice with your growth mindset voice, it will become easier to take the growth mindset action.

Taking the growth mindset action means:

1. Taking on the challenge wholeheartedly.
2. Learning from your setbacks and trying again.
3. Hearing the criticism and taking constructive action.

Continue listening to both voices and acting on the growth mindset voice as often as possible, and you will have an excellent foundation for the right mindset.